

J.R. Hervey, 1889 – 1958

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The poetry of J. R. Hervey is now largely forgotten, although it received favourable attention in his lifetime. Hervey was an Anglican clergyman from the Georgian generation, but his poetry generally avoids Georgian floridity. Instead, borrowing from contemporary models, from priestly predecessors like John Donne and George Herbert, and from older sacerdotal sources like bible and prayer book, Hervey created a resilient and flexible body of verse. Flexibility never implies triviality, however. The Romantic priest in Hervey probes the matters of life and death in a continuous search for poetry of universal significance. Though not always successful, his output nonetheless contains poems confirming the estimation in which his younger New Zealand contemporaries held him.

John Russell Hervey was born in 1889, but his work escapes easy generational classification because it was not widely published until the 1940s. Before then, Hervey was an Anglican priest of the interwar years, whose poetic endeavours were something of a sideline. Born in Invercargill, Hervey was educated in Christchurch, where he married Ethel Regina Choat in 1915. That year, he was ordained deacon in Wellington, while full priesthood followed in 1916. After working as a curate in Wellington and Christchurch, Hervey became vicar in a succession of rural Canterbury parishes (Malvern in 1921 and Temuka/Winchester in 1923). By 1925 he was back in Christchurch, including a seven year term from 1927 to 1934 at St. Stephen's, Shirley. Here, Hervey was known as an occasional writer, penning hymns for special services, including one for the Mothering Sunday service he instituted with his wife. He was remembered as a 'dynamic, forceful personality' and a fine orator, with a notably literary bent to his preaching. Thus, he delivered a sermon series on 'Great Books and their message', the books including *Les Miserables* and *Silas Marner*. Popular fiction received less approval: in the *New Zealand Churchman* for 1 September 1923, Hervey blamed calls for experimental marriage partly on sensationalist novels.

Ill-health forced Hervey's retirement from active church ministry in 1934, although he retained an officiating minister's licence from 1935. Retirement freed Hervey's muse, and he began to publish steadily in a selection of periodicals and in *New Zealand Best Poems*. In 1940, he drew attention for his prize-winning entries in the Government-sponsored Centennial Literary Competition. 'War Refugee' shared first prize in the short poem competition,

while ‘Salute to Youth’ beat off 94 other entries in the category for poems over 100 lines. This achievement can be denigrated (Patrick Evans calls ‘Salute to Youth’ ‘quaveringly archaic’), but the competition was not a simple whitewash: Frank Sargeson shared first prize in the Short Story section, while the Essay section was won by M. Holcroft.

That same year, Hervey’s first book appeared from The Caxton Press. *Selected Poems* contained the two prize-winning poems, as well as collecting poems published elsewhere. Despite Hervey’s age, it is an energetic first collection, displaying a firmness of expression and a range of forms. First person speakers predominate, but despite this, there is little sermonising. In subject matter, *Selected Poems* aims continually at significance — Love, Life and Death are constant themes — but the poetic resolutions rarely receive overt conditioning from their author’s priestly vocation. While religious references and biblical allusions are present, these are troubling, as in the cadences of ‘War Refugee’, reminders of the volume’s wartime date:

This passion cured
No sin, this cross procured
No rapt ascension...

Comparably, the ‘impeccable’ lead figure of ‘Soldier in White’ must double as Christ, for Hervey always deploys his Latinate vocabulary carefully. But this Christ-figure disturbs the speaker to ask whether such a white-clad shepherd priest ‘Should blacken snows with hate’, whether

...one in white, in God’s own white,
Should be of night, should be of night?

While a Georgian lilt remains in these lines, their unsettling sentiment confirms that *Selected Poems* is not confined to older modes and comforting subjects. Thus, in poems of irregular line length, sphinxes jostle for place with aeroplanes, and Syrian goddesses with parachute fatalities. Like his metaphysical predecessors, Hervey willingly employs contemporary technology and language in the quest to fathom the mysteries of life. Like them, too, his method is essentially contemplative, using events as cues for meditation, or clues in the search for grand and timeless truths.

Concurrent with Hervey’s attempt at poetry of eternal significance is a tendency towards abstraction. This partly explains, as one of *Selected Poems*’ first reviewers noted (*New Triad*, May-June 1940), why his work contains few New Zealand references. Indeed, as for all Hervey’s volumes, the

abstractions of *Selected Poems* spring mostly from European and ancient sources: stone images in a Channel Island graveyard ('Atargatis'), despoiled pyramids ('Ancient Tomb Robbers'), or distant European conflicts ('The Trumpeter of Cracow'). Although New Zealand events may lie behind the poems of everyday life ('Mrs Carmichael', 'Funeral', 'The Avengers'), there are few identifiably local markers.

New Poems, which followed in 1942, contains occasional reference to New Zealand matters ('At the Grave of Jessie MacKay', 'The Vigil (At the lying-in-state of Archbishop Julius)'). Yet the new volume is marked more by the rumour of distant wars. Several of the new poems ruminate on wartime events, including the bombing of the church where Milton is buried ('Statue Among Ruins'), and the progress of German tanks through Ukrainian cornfields ('In the Ukraine'). In these reflections on war, Hervey's voice is unwavering in opposing war and death with poetic vision and abstract hope. Hence hope's 'impish gleam' in 'The Black Out' mocks the 'fumes of fury', while birdsong drowns out the air patrol's 'chuckle of death' in 'The Nightingales'.

Hervey's reflections on war move quickly into considerations of Death, a subject already dominant in *Selected Poems*. The reviewer of *New Poems* in the Sydney-based *Bulletin* (5 May 1943) observed that 17 of its 50 poems are explicitly about death. While noting the dangers of repetition, the reviewer nonetheless praised the volume's 'coherent philosophy' in which earthly darkness must always compete with joy in eternity, and where pain is always paired with joy:

For life marches with change, the infidel—
Life links not with any man's desire,
Life that is hammer and fire.

These lines conclude 'Change to Snow', a poem exemplifying Elizabeth Caffin's observation that Hervey's lyrics often begin as expressions of personal emotion, before closing with a general harmonising statement. 'Change to Snow' starts by contemplating a landscape, before moving to consider the place of impermanent humanity among the processes of nature, represented by snow, 'the face of change whose frown/Invalidates the morning hope, wears down/The private boast'. The final lines, quoted above, step even further backwards, surveying all natural processes under life's hammer and fire, where fire could be either life-giving or destructive.

In several poems, *New Poems* situates this tension in a disguised Christian Platonism, where the eternal vision is considered adequate compensation for earthly suffering. In 'The Mourners Return', 'The Vigil' and 'Lazarus' (among others), it is the mourners in 'the leaden lands' who are to be pitied, not those 'redeemed from storm' by death. Though less reliant on the language of Christian paradox than they, this welcome to death evokes again the method of Herbert, Donne, and Henry Vaughan.

While traditional Anglican poetic models shape Hervey's contemplative approach, critics also discerned the influence of British contemporaries like W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice. These influences are evident in the variable line-lengths, intermittent or internal rhymes, and conversational rhythms. Often, Hervey uses the memory of iambic pentameter, modified sufficiently to rescue the rhythm (and also the imagery) from Georgian urbanity. Thus Johnson remarks how Hervey's terse language distances him from the 'soft and unreal images of the Georgian flowered carpet — wall-to-wall and very snug', while the reviewer of *New Poems* in *Letters* (June 1943) commented on Hervey's 'unaffected and crisp' language, and his 'short and vibrant lines'.

A gap of seven years separates *New Poems* from its successor volume, *Man on a Raft* (1949). In that time, Hervey published regularly in magazines, particularly the *New Zealand Listener*, while between 1947 and 1949 he also returned to ministry at Waitaki in the Dunedin Diocese. *Man on a Raft* confirmed Hervey's standing in the literary scene, included as it was in The Caxton Poets Series alongside volumes by James K. Baxter, Charles Brasch, Allen Curnow and others. The book shares many features with the earlier volumes, including coverage of contemporary events and personalities ('Mussolini', 'Hirohito'), and additional considerations of human mortality ('Other Worlds', 'It Was Not So', 'I Have Made Friends with Time'). W. Hart Smith noted recurring Hervey themes in his review of *Man on a Raft* (*New Zealand Listener*, 3 October 1950), considering the title poem to be the volume's 'interpretive key'. Humanity is the man adrift on the raft of the world, caught between 'life's resolution in death' and 'the poet's intuition of heaven'.

Despite the thematic repetition, *Man on a Raft* develops this standard Hervey theme in a new direction by considering its relevance at different stages of life. Birth, adolescence and aging provide anchoring markers to many of the poems, helping to palliate the earlier abstractions. Abstractions are also avoided by the use of natural landscapes as springboards for poetic

reflection. 'Hills', for example, begins with landscape description, before merging with Psalmody to deliberate on death and eternity:

I through whom storms the event,
I dragged through the maternalism of time,
Will look up to the hills whose peace
Is of the world's morning, their indifference
Will quieten me like death till I am aware
Of eternity calling from forgotten waters.

That Hervey's fixation with death owes much to Donne is acknowledged in 'John Donne's Defiance'. M. K. Joseph selected this poem as representative of Hervey's 'triumphant acceptance of mortality', and certainly it reinvents with fresh vigour the paradoxes of Donne's confrontation with death. Its sentiments are particularly appropriate for a volume written by a 60-year old man concerned with the stages of life:

Yet must I first oppose the final malice
Of death to whom my wall's a window inviting
His freezing stare on my enfeeblement.

By using the form of the dramatic monologue, this poem voices a Christian hope unusually explicit for Hervey, although the description of Christ as an 'Anchor' holding the speaker's ship against death's 'urgent tide' comes more from Donne's ventriloquial voice than Hervey's.

In appropriating Donne's imagery, Hervey finds metaphorical strength which commentators felt lacking in other poems from *Man on a Raft. Landfall* (1950, No. 14) considered the book's imagery diffuse and lacking in coherence. Instead, Hervey's best poems arise when he employs simple and direct means, rather than when he tries 'to surprise with a fine excess'. Such simplicity is evident in a poem like 'I Have Made Friends with Time', though the consummation of this plain style awaited Hervey's final volume in 1954.

Before then, Hervey continued to attempt poetry of the grand event, with two works commemorating the arrival of English settlers in Canterbury. An undistinguished 'Centennial Thanksgiving Hymn' was sung in Christchurch Cathedral and parish commemoration services, and published in the *New Zealand Listener* in 1950. Typically (though surprisingly given the occasion), the hymn contains no specific references to New Zealand, but many confident assumptions about the merits of colonisation. Some of these assumptions flow into 'Centennial Ode', although the Ode, written for choral performance

rather than congregational singing, is spared the hymn's forced piety. Performed by the Royal Christchurch Musical Society in 1951 to music by John Ritchie, the Ode blends memory, apprehension, and hope in its paeon to the 'Canterbury Pilgrims'. Despite its optimistic conclusion about the 'good' flowing 'from the mine of their endeavour', the poem attributes to the settlers an unsettled unease at the 'strangeness' of the 'new' land, though it never quite acknowledges the 'stain of blood' that marks Curnow's 'Landfall in Unknown Seas'. But it is recognisably about New Zealand, depicting an identifiably Cantabrian landfall:

Cupped in green
They came to clear waters
Whose own contentment
Flowed into them...

'Centennial Ode' was collected in Hervey's final volume, *She Was My Spring* (1954), though the hymn was not. Like all Hervey's previous books, *She Was My Spring* is dedicated to Ethel Hervey, but this time the dedication is also an elegy, with about half the poems approaching the subject of Ethel's death. Death was no new theme for Hervey, but this last book achieves a new integrity from his personal engagement with it. The passing of Ethel Hervey gives the poetry a local habitation, avoiding the excessive abstraction of some of the earlier verse. Joseph, reviewing *She Was My Spring* for *Landfall*, commented on the 'greater cohesion and singleness ... [reaching] from whole structures down to details of phrasing', a verdict repeated by others.

Among the finest of the elegiac poems is 'Letter to Another World', which recalls and answers an earlier poem facing it on the page, 'Letter to My Wife'. Like others of the grieving poems, 'Letter to Another World' uses the imagery of passing seasons, although here it establishes a celestial counterpoint to the seasonal rhythms of mortality. Addressing his deceased wife in 'From this autumn', the speaker writes to her with his news, telling her

...that summer redeems the earth, fore-shadowing
Your deathless season, and that your garden wears
No more an air of permanence and that I
Hold it an island with temporary provisions
Lying off the last continent and your completeness.

Joseph notes the ore loaded into these lines: the various religious and Platonic associations, the reminders of Ursula Bethell and Donne, the delicate ambiguity of 'hold' (which could mean 'defend' or 'consider'), and the exact

calculation of the phrasing as the lines move to their close. Hervey here attains the constant aim of his poetic output: an understated accommodation between death and consolation. In the process, Joseph argues, this poem obtains the quiet Christian serenity Hervey seeks.

Not every poem in *She Was My Spring* does so. There are poems in which death leads to incomprehension, and plaintive or unresolved sorrow ('I Sang My Love', 'Beggar the Heart', 'The Beach'). There are outright love poems, embroidered with naturalistic imagery, which gain poignancy from recalling a love that is past, as in 'Honeymoon Scene Revisited' and 'She Was My Love Who Could Deliver'. This last poem catalogues the refreshments bestowed by the tincture of the beloved's presence: she could, for example, 'renovate with raining laughter', and although the poem does not once mention her death, its use of the past tense contains an understated grief, even as it celebrates the beauty of love. It is the interplay between elegy, celebration, and Platonic yearning in *She Was My Spring* that prevents its serenity from becoming mawkish, and preserves the volume's note of authentic struggle with pain.

In addition to the poems sprung from Ethel Hervey's death, *She Was My Spring* contains a scattering of Hervey's more usual subjects. 'Ghandi Dead' is met by a poem on Kierkegaard ('His Love and Renunciation'), while there are poems opposing the inscrutable power of nature to the vanity of human technologies ('Glacier', 'Hydro Works', 'Train'). Nature symbolism, particularly the symbol of the mountains, recurs again in the customary considerations of death ('White, Dark', 'Mountaineer', 'The Return'). Joseph comments that these poems reinterpret the menace of the mountains, as death is reinterpreted in the elegies for Ethel Hervey, so that the mountains become symbols for human aspiration, expressing 'a journey made and a conquest achieved'. The final 'black mountain' of death is a challenge to be embraced, rather than a power to frighten:

And that black mountain closing every road
That outsoars every sun-required peak.
That, too, is with me as a promised climb,
My life to plan a favourable approach.
(‘White, Dark’)

The acceptance signalled in these poems is mirrored also in Hervey's Christmas poems. Hervey regularly published Christmas poems in the *New Zealand Listener*, and there is a scattering of them in *Selected Poems* and *Man on a Raft*. In *She Was My Spring*, the two Christmas poems assume, for

the first time, a noticeably antipodean colouring. Matching hemispheres in a manner not dissimilar to Ursula Bethell's 'Response', 'Christmas in the Sun' depicts a southern hemisphere Christmas picnic invaded by a carol broadcast from the northern winter. In 'Christmas Come In', winter is 'a ghost' and summer 'the host', while Christmas is bidden to 'come in unwearied, warm'. For a poet who is elsewhere quite willing to equate April with Spring and December with snow, this is perhaps an indication of increasing serenity.

Yet *She Was My Spring* is technically a more traditional book than Hervey's others. While Hervey was by no means a great poetic innovator, he often avoided traditional models, as if to avoid triteness. In this light, the number of sonnets in *She Was My Spring* is noteworthy. There are no sonnets in the first three volumes, but *She Was My Spring* contains eleven. In dealing with the universal subject matter of grief, Hervey falls back on an established poetic form as people fall back on familiar consolations in times of crisis.

Seventeenth-century poetry remains an obvious influence on *She Was My Spring*. While verbal influence is occasionally evident — commentators note Hervey's compact terseness, and (in E. H. McCormick's phrase) the 'grand hyperbolic seventeenth century manner' (Hervey's evocations of eternity necessarily use Donne-like paradoxes)—*She Was My Spring* is marked less by verbal echoes of the Metaphysicals than by their approach towards experience. Thus Johnson (echoing T. S. Eliot) sees the influence of Donne imparting to Hervey 'a method of contemplation, a metaphysic, a way of looking at things, from which point Hervey took over'. This is evident in poems like the 'Sonnets of Departure' or 'This Day That Heavy-Lidded Year', which use a series of images to distil and observe the central experience of grief. In the process, they recall, say, Herbert's 'Affliction' poems or (as Tom Crawford observed in *Here & Now* (May 1956)) 'The Exequy' of Henry King. Contemporary models are evident, too. *She Was My Spring* boasts an epigraph from Stephen Spender, used 'by permission of the author'; a reminder that Hervey had published in *Poetry Quarterly* (London). Joseph detects Auden's occasional influence (evident in surprising figures of speech involving man-made imagery), and the 'liturgical rhetoric of Charles Williams', apparent in the combination of abstract and concrete vocabulary, and in occasional heraldic flashes.

Though *She Was My Spring* was his last collected volume, Hervey continued to publish poetry until his death in 1958. 'Children Among Tombstones' appeared in *Landfall* only in 1955, but is one of his most anthologised pieces. As its title suggests, this poem continues the

'wrangle/Between life and death', in which childlike delight worsts the sober warnings of 'text-strewn graves' and 'epitaphs'. In its final triumph of laughter over death, 'Children Among Tombstones' provides a fitting close to Hervey's poetic oeuvre, his celebration of life in full acceptance of the shadow of death.

Hervey's star has now fallen: his work was absent from both the 1985 *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* and the 1997 *Oxford Anthology of New Zealand Poetry*. Nonetheless, the best of it remains worth reading. Writing in 1998, MacDonald Jackson cautiously affirmed Johnson's earlier verdict that Hervey was 'the best poet of his generation'. Certainly, when his poetic abstractions alight long enough in this world, the resulting metaphysical ruminations can be robust and rewarding. Hervey's determined pursuit of a Christian Platonist aesthetic may seem dated now, but the universalising drive behind it links him to a noble poetic tradition. When this tradition meets Hervey's personal experience, the resulting poetry is unique in New Zealand letters, as well as being surprisingly tough in fibre.

LINKS

[Hervey's Papers in the University of Canterbury Library](#)

BOOKS

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PAPERS

A collection of J. R. Hervey's papers is kept in the MacMillan Brown Library, Canterbury University, Christchurch, New Zealand.